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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, May 14, 1937

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "CELERY, A PLANT WITH A PAST." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Celery is a vegetable with a none too savory past. You wouldn't think it, would you? Such a mild flavored, white, aristocratic plant as it seems now!

But celery springs from a very humble family. It ran wild, and was of a really sharp and bitter character. People called it "smallage". Herb doctors had some respect for celery, though. They used to gather it, boil it up with other plants into a drink for the ailing. It must have been a most unpleasant dose, but it was believed to be helpful in cases of colic and gas-on-the-stomach.

Later thrifty housewives learned that celery gave a certain tang to their stews and soups. Then people discovered that blanching made it more delicate in flavor. And celery growers began to select their seed plants carefully year after year, to breed out the old bitter taste and strong odor.

So now celery ranks with the Vegetable Aristocracy. And as is usually true of the aristocracy, raising it and getting it ready for public appearance involves a considerable outlay of time and money. More probably than for any other vegetable.

Because of this high cost of production, celery costs a little more than do some other vegetables. So when we shop for celery we're likely to examine it pretty carefully to get our money's worth.

In the first place we don't want wilted celery. And we don't want celery that has big growth cracks in the stalks. Of course, if there are only about two of the outer stalks that have these growth cracks -- and small ones at that -- we don't especially object. But celery with big cracks doesn't look attractive and doesn't taste good either.

Pithy celery is another kind we try to avoid. The place to test for pithiness is the midrib of the outer stalks. If you press your thumb there you can tell if the stalk is springy and open in texture.

If the celery bunch is loose enough so you can, it's a good idea to pull the outer branches back to have a look at the heart. That way you can find out if a seed stem has begun to develop. If it has, you can be sure the celery is of poor flavor, sometimes even bitter, and that it is probably fibrous.

When you pull aside those outer stalks you'll also discover if there are any evidences of blackheart disease or of insect injury. Blackheart first attacks the young tender leaves of the celery hearts and turns them brown and finally black.

Cutworms also do lots of damage to celery. Of course, if the celery is of good grade you won't find any worms in it. But occasionally you may find some chewed places on the stalks.

Sometimes celery is trimmed down to hearts and sold without the coarser stalks. Then those outer branches are often tied into bunches and sold separately for soups and stews.

Especially fine flavored hearts are produced by a mold treatment after the blanching. A process which reminds us of the mold treatment for fine cheeses. And this is the way it is done. A dealer sets aside several crates of the celery in his store room and has the temperature just right to encourage certain molds.

These molds spread all over it, so that the visitor would think the celery would all have to be thrown away.

Evidently the mold doesn't reach the hearts, but it causes chemical changes which seem to penetrate through the outer stalks and ripen the hearts. At the proper stage in the molding, the celery hearts are rescued, the moldy outer branches and the tops are cut off, and the hearts are washed clean. I'm told that celery hearts which have been subjected to this "ordeal by mold" are unusually delicious, - of a crisp, somewhat nutty flavor. However, this molding process is not widely used.

Fortunately celery keeps well, so that most of a celery bunch can be eaten raw. But the outer branches are usually better cooked.

With celery as with the other vegetables, it's a good idea to start it cooking in already boiling salted water, and to use ONLY ENOUGH WATER TO KEEP THE CELERY FROM BOILING DRY. You don't want to throw away the water any vegetable is cooked in, because then you lose part of the good flavor as well as various minerals and vitamins. With celery it would be chiefly calcium and some vitamin B.

After the celery is tender and before it's cooked to pieces, it may be seasoned with butter or meat drippings, salt and pepper, and served. As you know, it's good, too, in a white sauce. And have you ever tried cooking celery with an equal quantity of turnips or of carrots? Celery and tomatoes make another delicious dish -- about 2 cups of celery pieces simmered with a quart of tomatoes.

Celery tops are mighty useful, too. They may be cooked with the chopped stalks for soup. Or they may go into stews. I know one cook who chops her celery tops fine for beef loaf and also for salmon loaf. If you have more tops than you can use promptly you can wash them thoroughly, then dry them and put them into a paper sack for use later.

To sum up what we've said about celery: When you buy, examine it for color, growth cracks, pithiness, blackheart disease, cut worm injury, and seed stem. And then don't throw away either the coarse outer stalks or the tops. Instead use them in cooked dishes.

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